

Testimony to the US Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition , and Forestry
House Agriculture Committee
January 25, 2010, Colton, Ca.

Edie Jessup, Program Development Specialist
Central Ca. Regional Obesity Prevention Program
1625 E. Shaw, Suite 106, Fresno, Ca 93710
559-228-2145 edijessup@csufresno.edu

Food Stamp participation and outreach in the Central Valley of California

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the condition in the San Joaquin Valley of California, and the need for full enrollment in the Federal Nutrition Programs by more than a majority of residents, in a dignified, equitable, and sustainable way---very quickly. I see this as urgent, not something that we need to analyze more. If Food Stamps are to fulfill their intended outcome of a healthy population ready to work and learn, you need to make Food Stamps work at once.

I will set the stage, with short comments on need for Federal Nutrition Programs, and then provide you with 7 specific issues that the Federal Government can and should address to assure full Food Stamp/SNAP participation from constituents in the Valley.

My name is Edie Jessup. For the last ten years I worked with a non-profit agency on a Hunger and Nutrition Project in Fresno, Ca. I am now working regionally with the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program as a Program Development Specialist. I am also co-chair of Roots of Change, working on a sustainable food system for California by 2030.

I see the federal nutrition programs as health programs, as violence prevention programs, and I see food as a human right. There is no scarcity of food. I also appreciate that agriculture is the meeting point tying health outcomes, access to healthy food, and, a revived agricultural economy in the Central Valley.

However, there is a political decision not to feed people in the United States.

I negotiated a meeting where the State and Federal Partnership on the San Joaquin Valley were willing to make Food Stamps their priority last year, and encourage businesses and other state and federal agencies to promote and support enrollment in Food Stamps. The County, State, and Federal offices started squabbling, and the offer to work to increase enrollment by the business community was taken off the table. The Chair said "Clearly you people (county, state, federal) do not want people eligible to be enrolled in food stamps for the betterment of their health, and the health of our local economy. There is no point in my sitting through any more of this, and wasting my time." Advocates tried to link up rural municipalities in places like Tranquility, and San Joaquin with the county Food Stamp office, to take applications at the city offices via computer. The County would not accommodate that because of fear they could not manage new cases of food stamp applicants if people were not in their office in Fresno, 80 miles away, in person. People do not have transportation, nor can they take a day off work to come into the county center. But they are hungry, and do qualify for food stamps.

I understand that prior to 1996; there was enough food 'on the shelf 'in the US to feed our country for a year. We have disinvested in storing for hard times and emergencies, and the consequence is seen in obesity and

malnutrition in the Central Valley, and is seen in the 'emergency' nature of incompetent food provision in disasters (Katrina, the California Central Valley drought, or Hati). Charity is not sufficient to supply the need for food by the chronically under wage households in California. It is apparent in the Central Valley the poor quality and safety of food provided for our school food programs, the fact that accessing the Child Care Food Program is nearly impossible for child care providers, and is inadequate.

I am witnessing the 'great unraveling' in my community. For the last ten years I have worked with Ca. Food Policy Advocates statewide, and with my county Department of Employment and Temporary Assistance, and the local school district to raise SNAP enrollment from the 50 % eligible but not enrolled low income families and individuals. The story in the Valley is the same. Low income wages at best, agricultural seasonal work, immigration raids and splitting families by deportation of our labor force. We know the eligibility is there because in the Fresno School District 83% of all children are eligible for free lunch, and most rural towns have Provision 2 schools—where all children are at least getting lunch. They report school lunch as the one meal daily they can count on during the week. Breakfast needs to be the first lesson of the day for every child in every school, and School Districts should be required to do this so that that Breakfast is truly accessible to kids. Their learning will improve. And Summer Lunch, a righteous program to provide food during time off from school, needs to be required by all school districts who serve over 50% free/reduced during the school year. The problems of summer lunch need to be solved by funding community based organizations to serve summer lunch, and schools should be required to provide and transport summer lunches to where kids are—whether neighborhood schools, or parks, or apartment building complexes, or churches in neighborhoods.

The population in the San Joaquin Valley is fragile. The conservative power structure's "blame the victim" mentality results in institutionalized racism that determines who eats, and results in poor health outcomes.

That attitude of scarcity preserve the poverty and ill health of the very people assuring the rest of the nation access to healthy food. I currently work with the Central Valley Regional Obesity Prevention Program, directly working on environmental change and policy change to give people access to healthier food and safe physical activity. In Mendota, where so much public attention has been drawn to the drought's impact on a town, nearly completely unemployed, 37 of 80 Head Start children are obese as a direct result of diet,. The local store carries junk food and poor parents take food bank commodities or donated top-ramen as the primary food on their table. Their health will be on our Hospital doorstep, and the chronic treatment for diabetes in these children will lead to impaired lives, and is now creating poor learning in our schools. We have created this monster of a human problem. Our Public Health Officer in Fresno County says that he can tell how many generations an individual has been here by the decline in health status; the biggest public health issues in Fresno County are asthma, obesity, and diabetes. Chronic disease by diet, and our food system practices .

Federal Nutrition Programs would bring in over \$170 million yearly in Food Stamp benefits to my county if all were enrolled. That is to purchase food, our number one business in Fresno and the Valley. But it is not happening. The feds blame the state, the state blames the feds, and in 10 years of the major barriers to enrollment being identified again and again, no one cares to do anything. The USDA Western Regional Office wants to assist, the state would like to turn this around, the counties in the Valley, because of reimbursement formulas that do not support the administration of food stamps try to do what they can, while struggling with caseloads of 500 families/worker, and feel under the gun by USDA for sanctions if they make an error.

Most concerning to me is the institutionalization of poor diet, the lack of fresh, healthy food in neighborhoods, and because of deep poverty, and the fact that unhealthy food is the cheapest, large numbers of folks truly have no access to healthy food. Taking on the industry of food has to happen, and the federal government must engage (from the health and environmental perspective) states and local governments in making food access a high priority in zoning, ordinances, and assuring equitable access to affordable food. Grocery Stores decide to pull out of low income neighborhoods, leaving food deserts, and populations at risk in ill health.

This leads to the ever unmentionable issue of who and what the federal government subsidies in the food system. It is your watch. Painfully we need to subsidize food that is healthy for all people. We must cease subsidizing farmers not to farm. We must undergird small farmers who are raising our food in sustainable ways.

We must subsidize and favor food that is not polluted with corn syrup, fat, and salt, because we are producing unhealthy generations who will not be able to live without extreme and long term medical support. Or, they will die from diet that leads to diabetes, heart disease, cancer.

Meanwhile, the economy has created devastation in towns throughout the Valley, and drought that has displaced farm workers, and local businesses.

The nation expects fruits and vegetables to feed the nation from this very place where people are hungry. It is a fragile place at best, filled with what in any other day or time would be considered good, hardworking people.

These are the seven recommendations that would create increased enrollment in Food Stamps.

1. In the Valley, families need linked enrollment, without repeated applications for Food Stamps, WIC, School and Child Care food programs, and USDA Commodities. If poor families cobble together all these programs they might have enough to eat for a month. The programs could be linked and tiered so when times were better, or income improved, individual programs could be dropped as a benefit. None of these federal food programs, by themselves, is adequate for hungry families.
2. I call on you to require ICE and USDA to jointly sign a clarifying letter that acknowledges that immigrant families will not be denied a change in their legal status because of accessing food programs for which they are eligible.

We have mixed immigrant families from all over the world in Fresno, over 100 languages spoken in our school district, afraid to apply for Food Stamps, and afraid that if they allow their children to eat school lunch or summer lunch, for which their citizen children are eligible, their family will be split by deportation, or, that they will be ineligible for legal status or citizenship. Both Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and USDA say that there is no Public Charge issue, but they refuse to sign a joint letter and directive that clarifies this.

3. Families are definitely afraid to apply for food stamps given that even though parts of their family are eligible because all adults have to be fingerprinted and photographed to apply for EBT by California rules.

I would ask that in order to enroll all eligible people in the federal food stamp program, you create federal legislation that bans using fingerimaging in connection with food stamps. The purpose of the

move to EBT was to eliminate any fraud by Food Stamp clients. It has worked, and redundant, pejorative continuance of photography and finger imaging as if applicant families were terrorists is untenable and costly in California.

Prohibit California from requiring fingerprinting as, it costs over 11 million dollars, is revealing no fraud, and blocks families from Food Stamp participation.

4. If we are providing fresh, safe affordable produce for the rest of the nation, it seems that the purpose of federal agriculture programs should accrue to those in need, who are providing the labor for feeding America, other than by standing in lines and convincing people how poor they really are for a hand out of food that is making them ill with diabetes and obesity. My recommendation is to provide a federal waiver and enroll in Food Stamps everyone standing in too infrequent commodity distributions in food stamps, and sort out eligibility later, within the first 6 months. And if they really do not qualify, drop their enrollment.
5. I have to report that though the counties try pretty hard, their cultural competence is poor, and people are treated poorly, do not feel welcome in Food Stamp offices. People I have surveyed feel their treatment is racially and class motivated. Food Stamp workers feel overworked. The USDA and Congress could address the public sense that Food Stamps are for people who do not deserve food.
6. Some of the reasons for low enrollment are the facts of poverty, and the complexity of rules, difficulty in enrolling, multiple trips to the County office to qualify, county refusal to take options like face-to-face waivers that are allowed, etc. Clearly, a simple sheet of paper or on line version of the application is preferable to the complex, nearly impossible to translate into 100 languages that we now have. Honestly, Hmong neighbors have told me that my County calls in the Janitor to interpret for applicants, or the 10 year old children are the family representatives. This is truly crazy. Increase the administrative federal share, so that services offered can be rendered to eligible families.
7. Lastly, require California to enroll elders in Food Stamps. The irony is that some 40 years ago, California took some 'options' offered by USDA and they are still in place, although most all other states have rejected and reformulated their Food Stamp/SNAP rules. Federal Legislation calls out that California SSI/SSD recipients cannot receive food stamps, even though they qualify by income. So, we have elders (about to grow into a larger poorer group because of the Baby Boomers) not eating in order to keep their home, or pay for medications and transportation, or because they are feeding their grandchildren, and becoming ill. I request that you see that the federal exception for California is taken out of the federal register, and require the State of California to directly enroll all SSI/SSDI recipients automatically, now.

What if we fed people? What if we saw to it that the bounty of what we produce gets eaten, through normal channels, like purchasing at the store? The clear distance between producer and consumer has become larger, more bloated, and the in-between distribution and processing is taking the money and seeing to it that the farmer does not get enough to farm, and the consumer pays too high a price for unhealthy, over processed food. The Federal Nutrition Programs can and should be made available to all who qualify. If people are fed reliably and healthily they can pay their rent, and begin to address work and education, and be contributing citizens. There is plenty of food, and we can assure through Food Stamps and other programs that all those eligible are enrolled. Thank you.

Additional Federal Nutrition Issues

Breakfast, lunch, summer lunch: School districts need adequate federal reimbursement.

Quality of food in school programs must be improved and funded adequately, and incentivize local purchase.

In California, Counties are allowed one of 4 computer systems that do not communicate with each other. Each state should engage one computer system for Food Stamps.

Elevate Federal Nutrition Programs to the status of Health Care, because Federal Nutrition Programs are Health Programs. Perhaps, a joint initiative with HHS? Or National Institute of Health?

Incentivize EBT purchase of fruits and vegetables with bonus added to EBT for such purchases.

Sustainable food system: Local and regional distribution should be priority, and replace current commodity structures in the USDA. This will re-create vibrant farm to table and institution results, and economic viability in the agricultural areas of the country.

Require Farmers to overtly support all USDA programs, including SNAP as part of their subsidy acceptance.

Biography

Edith C. Jessup (Edie)

Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program

Ethnic Background Okie

Education BA Pomona College, Claremont, Ca Sociology

2009 Currently employed by the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program, California State University Fresno Department of Health and Human Services, Central California Center for Health and Human Services. Program Development Specialist.

Previous Employment:

Fresno Metro Ministry, Fresno, Ca -Coordinator, Hunger & Nutrition 2000-2009;

Girl Scouts, Golden Valley Council, Fresno, Ca -Public Relations and Fund Development;

York County Homeless Shelters, Alfred, Maine -Director, Family Services; Admin. Assistant

Sanford Public Library Adult Literacy Program, Sanford, Maine -Project Coordinator

Edie grew up in Porterville, Tulare County, California. Edie has worked eclectically over her career, primarily in advocacy and direct service work with neighbors who happen to be poor, and thereby hungry, homeless, and without health access. Her focus is on creating an arena where people can, *in their own voice*, advocate for themselves. Through her experiences in listening to people she is convinced that there is a story about basic needs and rights and how systems impact the poor, and, people want to hear about this. If people can hear, they will want to change themselves and the system. Edie is committed to restoring the food system and food justice.

At Fresno Metro Ministry from 2000-2009, Edie organized food advocacy in the community, conducted monthly Hunger and Nutrition Forums, conducted a Community Food Assessment, and convened a monthly Food Stamp Advocates Task Group with the Fresno County Employment and Temporary Assistance Department. She yearly participated in Hunger Action Day with local residents. In March of 2006, Edie became Director of the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) for Fresno County, in partnership with the Fresno County Department of Community Health, and California State University, Fresno; and began formation of a Fresno County Food and Built Environment Policy Council, as well as providing technical assistance to 5 other counties on community involvement in environmental change. Following a year of planning and developing, an implementation Director was hired, and Edie continued Technical Assistance for CCROPP. In the fall of 2009 Edie was hired at the Regional CCROPP office as the Program Development Specialist, currently focusing on Regional food access.

Edie presented "Food Security, Poverty, Race and Nutrition Related Disease" on aspects of community change and chronic disease at the October 2003 American Heart Association's Minority Health Summit and Health Disparities Conference in Atlanta, and at the American Planning Association Meeting in 2005. She is the recipient of the NAACP Image Award 2003; Way of Peace Award, Fresno Center for Nonviolence 2006. She has been a keynote speaker at the Ca. National Social Workers Meeting (2007), and lectured at CSUF Ethics Lecture Series 'Politics and Food Scarcity' (2008).

Edie participates actively on a number of state and regional food and nutrition committees: Ca. Department of Health/Cancer Prevention & Nutrition Section- Network for a Healthy California Joint Steering Committee Executive Committee; Food Resources and Nutrition Action Team Co-Chair; California Hunger Action Coalition; Roots of Change, Stewardship Council co-chair; Ca. Department of Agriculture AgVision 2030 member; Interfaith Alliance of Central California; Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Committee.